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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 16

MIAMI HERALD
19 August 1984

Schoolgirl spy finally finds peace

By JEFF LEEN
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When Helene Deschamps was a 17-year-old French convent girl, she become a spy. Innocence, she found, was the perfect cover.

Working as a secretary in the bowels of the French Gestapo, she would stuff the dossier of a Resistance fighter into her bra, walk into the bathroom, shred the papers and flush them. She estimates 100 Frenchmen were flushed to safety.

In August 1944, her sister, a fellow agent, was shot in the heart before Helene's eyes as they drove to meet American forces landing in the south of France in what has become known as "The Second D-Day." She buried her sister and made the rendezvous.

This week, Deschamps, who now lives in West Palm Beach, is back in France for a week of ceremonies celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Second D-Day. She was invited as the guest of the French government along with former CIA director William Casey and his wife.

"Helene was a very gutsy young woman," said Henry Hyde, the wartime chief of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) — forerunner of the CIA — in Algiers. "She went through the lines for us observing German defense installations. She took many risks. She was very pretty, very gutsy and a genuine good agent."

At 61, she is a striking woman who lives "like a hermit" in a nicely furnished but modest inland condominium. Sitting in her apartment recently, she told war stories in a French accent spruced with a brave bonhomie, a survivor's ability to smile through the wreckage of war.

"It was hell," she said of the five years she spent underground, first for the French and later for the Americans. "You never feel at peace. You're always afraid. You sleep when you can and you eat when you can. Sometimes we went two or three days without eating."

It was a life of safe houses, code names (she had two, "Anick" and "H-1"), radio transmitters, false identification papers and letter drops. A simple trip to the market could result in an arrest. Arrested once in Paris, she faked a miscarriage to escape an interrogation cell.

She survived six months on a daily two slices of bread made of "sawdust and flour full of worms."

Riding her Peugeot bicycle, she counted enemy troops and studied German coastal defenses. She spotted mine fields and camouflaged artillery. She helped American fliers and Jews escape across the Spanish border. She was seldom paid and when it was all over she received no medal.

"I was raised military, and for me I thought that was the answer," she said. "We had to fight back any way we could."

Deschamps was born in northern China into a French military family that traces its lineage to one of Napoleon's generals. Her family lived on posts in Africa, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean. Private tutors instructed her in fencing, target-shooting and climbing.

She was in France attending the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Avignon when war broke out in Europe. Her two brothers immediately joined the Free French Forces in Algiers. She spent months seeking a way she could fight. Finally, she talked her way into a courier's job with the Resistance in late 1940. She never told her mother.

"She never knew until the end of the war what I was doing," she said.

At first, she rode her bicycle delivering pamphlets exhorting the French to resist "les Boches" (a slur for the Germans). Later, she got a job in Vichy, the capital of the Nazi-collaborating French. She worked for the "Milice" — Frenchmen enlisted in a German-controlled Gestapo unit. Soon her co-workers were looking for the leak to explain their poor performance.

"I was interrogated, beat up," she remembered. "They released me because I was so young. You could play dumb because of your youth. In my day, 17 and 18 wasn't what the kids are like in this day. We were innocent."

In 1943, weary of the infighting among the French Resistance, she joined the Americans — signing on with the OSS. Her adopted sister, Jackie, joined, too.

Sniper fire

The two sisters were driving to St. Tropez to meet the landing American troops on the "Second D-Day" when Jackie was shot by a sniper while she was crawling over a car seat to exchange places with Helene.

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"I felt responsible for her death," she said. "She knew she was going to be killed. She didn't want to go on this mission. I buried her myself and continued the mission."

The landing succeeded, combining with the first D-Day to wedge the Germans from French soil.

In 1945, an exhausted Deschamps resigned from the OSS and was sent to the Carlton Hotel in Cannes to recuperate. The hotel was managed by a young U.S. Army lieutenant suffering from shell-shock. His name was Forrest Adams, and he asked her out the first night she was there. On the third night he asked her to marry him.

She was an Army war bride, arriving in America six months ahead of her husband. Adams attended the University of Southern California on the GI bill. He had never recovered sufficiently from his wounds, mental and physical. He died at 29, three weeks short of getting a degree in civil engineering. Helene had a 10-month-old baby girl and no visible means of support. She became a French teacher.

In Hawaii, she taught American soldiers headed for Vietnam in the early 1960s. In Los Angeles, she came to know and befriend the sisters of the Shah of Iran. She moved to Tehran to teach for five years at the American International School in the late 1960s. For the past nine years, she has lived in Palm Beach County where her daughter, Karyn Monget, formerly fashion editor of the Palm Beach Daily News, is now a model and free-lance writer.

On this trip to France, she plans to spend two weeks visiting her brother Henri in the coastal town of Beziers. Her brother Maurice died wearing a French Army uniform at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and is buried in Hanoi.

Her home is filled with Chinese knick-knacks, Iranian porcelain, French paintings. There is an enameled cigarette case — a gift from Princess Sharms of Iran. But her proudest possession may well be her U.S. citizenship, which she received 32 years ago.

A Reagan supporter

At the Bicentennial celebration in Washington, she was included in an exhibition on women spies. She proudly displays a letter from President Reagan, a form letter answer to a message of support. She supports Reagan and is glad the country is becoming stronger militarily and more patriotic.

Americans, she feels, don't understand the price the world once paid for freedom. She quit giving lectures because she got so angry at the questions.

"The American women would raise their hand and say, well, we had restrictions, too," she said. "We couldn't make jam. Half of France was starving and they were worried about making jam. When I told one group that I had been underground five years, a woman asked how do you stand it without going up for air? They thought I was living in a sewer."

Most of Deschamps' exploits are just now being declassified. In May, the CIA turned over records of OSS operations to the National Archives in Washington. The first batch was opened to the public on June 11.

When the books about the spy war came out, she was not in them. Taking a pen name, she wrote her own book, *The Secret War of Helene De Champlain*, which was published in London in 1980. It took 17 years to write and it did not become a best seller. But the book accomplished something else.

"As soon as I put it down in the book then the nightmares were gone," she said. "When you are able to write it down, it relieves you a lot."

In *The Secret War*, Deschamps wrote:

"I, H-1, live alone. It was my destiny after all. I never really adjusted to a routine life, with regular hours and chores. My free spirit has never accepted the transition. I rebel when I feel forced into a situation. Even though I am not so very old, I feel that I have lived longer than most people."

She wrote her book in English, not her native French because "French people are not interested in war stories. We've had too many wars."

Spy thrillers

Her own bookshelves are well-stocked with war volumes and spy thrillers by Robert Ludlum, Len Deighton, Frederick Forsythe, John le Carre.

Le Carre provided the epigraph for her book:

"There's fieldmen, and there's deskmen, and it's up to you and me to see that the distinction is preserved . . ."

Clearly she was a fieldman. Now she herself aspires to write spy fiction. She has a manuscript titled *Spyglass*, and would like to place it and *The Secret War* with an American publisher. But she says publishers have found the nonfiction book lacking in luridness.

"One said there's not enough sex," she said. "One said it's not bloody enough and one said we'd like more like Mata Hari."

She never remarried and does not socialize much anymore.

"Usually people get bored when I tell war stories," she said. "They say, 'Oh, she's imagining.' "

Among the books on her shelf is the definitive one on OSS operations in World War II, *The Secret War Report of the OSS*, a 572-page account by noted espionage author Anthony Cave Brown. A chapter is devoted to "Penny Farthing," the code name for Deschamps' network. In her copy she has added remarks in blue pen.

Next to "The original [Penny Farthing] staff of 23 on D-Day was augmented at intervals until some 150 men represented OSS in one capacity or another in France," she has written, "plus one woman, me!"

Next to "one of the agents was wounded by a booby-trapped grenade located between the lines," she has written the name Bill Duff, a friend. Next to "the joint losses of the three [units] at the end of October were 10 killed, 15 wounded, 39 captured," she has added one word: "Jackie."

A fieldman must preserve the distinctions.

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